

# Violence with a purpose: exploring the functions and meaning of violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo

**Roberto Beneduce, Luca Jourdan, Timothy Raeymaekers & Koen Vlassenroot**

*In situations of protracted armed conflict such as in sub-Saharan Africa, there exists a strong tendency to describe rebel violence as a senseless war of 'all-against-all'. This 'Hobbesian' violence (a theory that people have the fundamental right to pursue selfish aims but will relinquish those rights in the interest of the common good) is often illustrated by the sight of drugged and gun-toting youths engaged in the harassment of innocent civilians. Their sole motivation appears to lay in the benefit of organized plunder. However 'senseless' it may appear, the violence still has its functions. It is used to foster strategies of political control, and has an important identity and social dimension. This article explores both the political and socio-psychological functions of violence in the rural areas of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The analysis focuses on the provinces of North and South Kivu and on Ituri, where the authors have carried out extensive field research. Their analysis will be developed in particular regard to the current demobilisation and reintegration efforts that are carried out within the scope of the 'transition' process in the DRC, but which so far have seen limited results. Finally, the authors will explore some alternative methods to rethink war trauma and the rehabilitation of ex-combatants in (former) conflict areas such as the DRC.*

**Keywords:** civil conflict, conflict resolution, Democratic Republic of Congo, demobilization, reintegration

## **Introduction**

Violent conflict has engulfed the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) for much of the last decade. It has caused, directly and indirectly, more than 3 million deaths, massive internal displacement, refugee movements, and generalised insecurity. Despite the hopes for peace offered by the Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement (1999), the Sun City Accords (2003), and the subsequent establishment of the Transitional Government in June 2003, the security situation in the rural areas has hardly improved. Rural populations in eastern Congo continue to live under the same harsh conditions produced by a decade of violent conflict. Citizens are still confronted with an extortion of their economic activity, the imposition of forced taxes, summary killings, detentions and executions, as well as systematic sexual violence against women and girls. Even as Congo moves towards greater political and economic stability, the 'smouldering' conflict that has ruled people's lives for years continues to determine the living conditions of large parts of the rural areas in the eastern parts of the country. This situation of 'neither-peace-nor-war' can partially be attributed to a lack of confidence of the former warring actors in the peace process, and the continuing presence of foreign militias on Congolese territory. Yet, at the same time, they point to an increase in the

use of violence at all levels of society. As part of the Congolese conflict, a number of socio-economic dynamics have led to a thorough transformation of local societies, and a shift of authority to the advantage of armed actors.

These dynamics, and the use and impact of brutal acts of violence, are at the centre of this article. Our central argument is that efforts to end war and promote sustainable development in the DRC should be grounded in attention to phenomena that lie beneath the more often discussed international and regional dimensions of the conflict. One of the underlying ideas sustaining this argument is that chronic violence cannot be understood purely with reference to the strategies developed by powerful local and international actors. Rather, the seeming intractability of the Congolese conflict can only be fully understood with reference to:

1. the ways in which conflict has reshaped structures of opportunity and meaning at the level of 'grassroots' interaction; and
2. the motivations of the perpetrators of violence at an individual level.

Taking the example of youth, one of the main protagonists of the Congolese war, it can be argued that violence can be understood both as local discourse, and a means to gain access to public and private goods, which in turn has reshaped local rural societies. It will also be argued that to be successful, any attempt to bring about peace needs to acknowledge the individual motivations of perpetrators of violence, as well as the social transformations that result from the protracted use of violence in local societies.<sup>1</sup>

### **Processes of social transformation in eastern DRC**

When studying the Congolese war, one cannot help but emphasise the dire humanitarian consequences of this 10-year conflict.

The war in eastern DRC has generated one of the most severe humanitarian crises since the Second World War.<sup>2</sup> In a conflict that has involved over six African nations and more than a dozen rebel groups, more than 3 million Congolese have died – either as a direct or an indirect consequence of these armed confrontations. Many have lost their physical and financial belongings, while at the same time the war has led to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people, who continue to be dispersed today.

One of the reasons for this humanitarian disaster is the extreme proliferation of armed participants since the start of the war. The territory has been carved up into a series of rebel-held territorial 'enclaves' (Callaghy, Kassimir & Latham, 2001; Duffield, 2002). In some cases, the emerging alliance between rural armed participants, economic entrepreneurs and local administrative authorities has created a degree of political and economic continuity within these enclaves, leading in turn to a situation of (relative) security.<sup>3</sup> In other regions, the continuing competition between foreign and local militias for the access to (economic and political) resources has become the main source of insecurity for the local population.<sup>4</sup>

In most regions, some form of accommodation between these opposing factions and local elites (who appear to have found mutual benefit in the existing situation of 'neither-war-nor-peace') has nonetheless appeared. It could be said that the 'smouldering' nature of the Congolese conflict carries both elements of stability and instability, depending on the access and entitlement to local livelihood options. The social transformations that have resulted from this accommodation has led in turn to the consolidation of new forms of social control, economic dominance and protection. Most of these new centres have been able to survive during the transition

process because of their ability to consolidate the mechanisms of local control.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, the conflict in eastern Congo appears to have led to the establishment of several informal governance structures, which are progressively setting the frame for local social and economic interaction. Instead of leading to a breakdown or chaos, contemporary conflicts like the war in the DRC seem to bear the potential of creating new complexes of 'profit, power and protection'. These complexes could be described as parallel governance structures that function next to the formal state apparatus (and sometimes make use of it) to foster an independent process of politico-military control, of economic redistribution, and of rights to wealth. These complexes have made use of the withering state competence to consolidate themselves as new centres of authority, economic regulation, and social control. They have planted themselves on the challenges of both increasing state 'collapse' and regional warfare, to foster new modes of social and economic integration.

These complexes have had a double effect on the local Congolese society. On the one hand, they have seriously disrupted traditional social and economic strategies, leading to a further breakdown of the old social order. On the other hand, they represent a structural answer of a marginalised population to a situation of enduring conflict, carrying within it new elements of integration and transformation, and carried forward by a redefinition of authority at a grassroots level of society. This evolution confirms the earlier statement that conflict is not only about breakdown and chaos, but can carry the seed of a new political order.

### **Neither-peace-nor-war**

The emergence of new power centres presents a number of fundamental difficulties

for the formal transition framework in the DRC. The war has demonstrated that interests of local elites are best served through their association with informal and stateless governance structures. This contrasts with the inclusive and formal state formation proposed in the Congolese transition process. Starting with the signing of the Lusaka cease-fire agreement in 1999, and culminating in the inauguration of the Transitional Government in June 2003 in Kinshasa, this process has been carried forward by the international community as a guarantee for national and regional stability. Until today, this process has nonetheless concentrated largely on the implementation of political agreements at a national level. This has included the establishment of Transitional Government and other political institutions, as well as a number of financial initiatives, to get the national economy back on track. Although this transition has undoubtedly attained a number of successes (the most important of which are military stalemate and an all-inclusive power-sharing agreement in the country's capital), some contentious and unresolved issues nonetheless demonstrate a more general problem in acceptance of this internationally induced peace process. A lack of unity among the members of the Transitional Government<sup>6</sup> has a very important, and negative impact in the Kivu provinces, not least because there are still numerous ethnic and political tensions.

It could also be feared that the combination of transition and continuing insecurity in the east could reignite the 'smouldering' power struggles between local and national political entrepreneurs. While the international community seems to be focused on creating a number of 'islands of stability' in Congo – which would include the capital along with a number of strategic provincial towns – the entire interior of the country risks being

left behind in a general state of chaos. It is here that historical land conflicts, border disputes, and communal resentment may continue to be exploited by local entrepreneurs in search of their own power base. In the meantime, dispersed armed groups continue to profit from the extortion of agriculture, trade and exploitation activities – which in turn provide the main mean of living for eastern Congo's impoverished populations. In other words, the present peace process risks bringing peace to the urban populations while leaving the rural populations in the midst of an unending low-intensity conflict.

This context offers the perfect environment for the continuous recruitment of young combatants and, more importantly, also reinforces the shift of the monopoly on violence from the state to individuals. Contrary to the pre-war situation, the Mobutist pact between citizens and the state has been broken. As a result, 'débrouillardise' (the principle of fending for oneself) has gradually lost the character of a social pact to become the unconditional rule of individual behaviour. Within this context, violence has become the most important instrument to affirm personal interests. In this situation of general despair, opportunism becomes an easy excuse for generalised violence. Individuals, who in normal circumstances would not be attracted to violent behaviour, today are seen to be working in collusion with armed groups that are engaged in predatory activities. 'Streetlords' and other uncontrollable recruits have set up their own private protection mechanisms. The end result of this process is a criminalised society that is further reinforced by the general state of impunity.

### **The participation of young people and children in violence**

One of the key actors in this 'traffic d'influence' is the younger generation.<sup>7</sup> A large part

of the combatants in the militias and rebel armies in the Kivus and Ituri are less than 18 years old. Enrolment often constitutes an alternative to the lack of employment opportunities as well as to the breakdown of the school system, which has been de facto privatised and represents an excessive cost for most families. Furthermore, the collapse of the state has led to a situation of general insecurity, which constitutes the ideal background for local leaders to manipulate ethnic identities in order to induce young people to enrol. In such a context, as David Keen (1998) has argued, *'for significant groups both at the top and at the bottom of the society, violence can be an opportunity, rather than a problem'*.

Once the war had started, the escalation of conflict often forced young people to join armies and militias *en masse*. In the case of Ituri, the bonds of solidarity within the different communities have induced most families to send at least one of their children to the militias that claim to fight for the interests of their ethnic group. In a situation of widespread insecurity, enrolment is sometimes the only alternative to death, and the only way to save one's community from extermination. In fact, the logic that tends to prevail in a fratricidal conflict, as is the case in Ituri, is very simple and brutal: *'kill, or you will be killed'*. Besides, the different factions often present themselves as victims of a broad conspiracy, which aims to exterminate the entire ethnic group. According to this kind of propaganda, the mobilisation of all forces within the community (including women and children) and the complete elimination of the enemy, are presented by political and military leaders as the only path to *'salvation'*. This opportunistic interpretation of events tends to be self-validating. From this point of view, the analysis of the genealogy and the dynamics of conflict, even when focused on young people, must consider that *'violence*

*gives birth to itself*, often producing a 'continuum of violence' (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004). Often, the political leaders are not able to control or profit from the processes they have primed.

The participation of young people and children in war has important consequences for the social fabric and local culture as a whole.<sup>8</sup> Combatants, through the use of violence, can renegotiate their status and are able to conquer within the society a social space from which they are normally excluded because of their youth. In most African societies, the hierarchy of power tends to mirror the division in age classes. Old people usually exercise strong control over younger generations, but the state of war can completely upset this basic hierarchy. For example, a child who exercises violence against an adult not only goes beyond his social role but also even inverts it. These new participants emerging from the state of war, such as child soldiers, are difficult to place within the traditional social order. These phenomena are deeply disorienting because they redefine the relationships of power within communities, and even within families. Practitioners that are involved in peace building and Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration projects must take into account these deep transformations resulting from war. In particular, they have to evaluate carefully the mutual perception(s) between adults on one side, and young people who participated in violence on the other side. The way ex-combatants are perceived by the rest of the population plays a fundamental role in the process of their social reintegration.

### **New identities emerging from the 'state of war'**

In the situation of social and economic collapse, which characterizes the eastern DR

Congo, the new generation(s) experience a deep sense of disorientation. On the one hand, the traditional culture and the traditional forms of social organization are no longer able to give sense to or organize reality. On the other hand, the idea of modernization and the 'theology' of development have completely failed, producing only disillusion and frustration. In this context of widespread uncertainty, many youngsters will try to redefine their identity. Violence often offers them an alternative model of identity as well as an opportunity to affirm their own subjectivity, or self-assertion.

Achille Mbembe (2002) argued that *'the state of war in contemporary Africa should [in fact] be conceived as a general cultural experience that shapes identities, just as do the family, the school and other social institutions'*. According to Mbembe the state of war represents a zone of indistinction, where the boundaries between chaos and order disappear. Young combatants and child soldiers are among the new identities emerging from these unstable contexts. Within militias and armies they develop new forms of solidarities, alternative to civil life, and they often create new languages, dressing themselves according to a peculiar style: *'[Through] war, the African individual changes his/her own subjectivity and produces (...) something radically new'*.<sup>9</sup> Besides, the 'state of war' becomes the premise for a generalized right to exercise the power to kill individually, as well as collectively. Youths are attracted by the possibilities offered by these strategies of assertion of the self and, in many cases, participate voluntarily in the activities of war.<sup>10</sup>

In the definition of these identities emerging in times of war, an important role seems to be played by action movies. On this subject, Rémy Bazenguissa-Ganga (1999) has studied the relationship between cinema, violence and bodies in the case of the militias Ninja,

Cobra and Zulu, in the Republic of Congo. His study explores the way movies affect the forms of violence, slang, and gestures of young militiamen in Brazzaville. Such a relation can be observed even in the case of east Congo. For example, in August 2003, some months after the European Union had deployed French troops to Bunia, most of the small and crowded cinemas of the city were showing war and karate movies non-stop. The loudspeakers, placed outside the cinemas and in the dusty slums to attract customers, loudly reproduced the shots and screams of the fights shown on the screen. At the same time, groups of children were challenging each other along the streets by imitating the poses and the gestures of the actors admired from the local cinema. These phenomena do not represent a collective regression: on the contrary, the identification with the fanciful *'strongmen'*, created by the cinema industry, reveals a deep exigency of redefining a new identity and a new social status.<sup>11</sup> War or karate movies often tell the story of a young man who by resorting to violence is able to impose his own law and reaffirm justice in a society. In some cases, this society excludes or even persecutes him.<sup>12</sup> Because of the condition of poverty and exclusion in which many live, young people can easily identify with the plots of these movies, and they embody the gestures and the poses seen on the screen by reproducing them in real life.

At the community level, the image of the soldier represents a model of a strongman in young people's imaginations. For many young people, violence has become the only practical strategy of self-affirmation and social mobility. Civilians, who hardly ever escape from a position of passive subordination by these same combatants, usually fear them. Furthermore, through pillage combatants are able to participate in the economy

of desired goods – cars, motorcycles, radios, sunglasses, etc. – which are normally beyond their means (Mbembe, 2002). The ostentatious display of these goods, which are symbols of modernity, increases and redefines their status. Nevertheless, young and above all child-soldiers are ambivalent figures; although they participate actively in war and violence, they remain weak actors that can be easily manipulated by older generations, and by political leaders. The ambiguity of their status can constitute an obstacle to their social reintegration; victims and perpetrators at the same time; ex-combatants hardly ever submit themselves to civil authorities. Yet, at the same time, they are often stigmatised by the population that has been the victim of their abuses.

### **A clinical and anthropological approach to violence and trauma**

In many cases, young recruits are responsible for atrocities and acts of violence, often macabre and ritualised, and people often consider them as *'polluted men'* or *'witches'* representing a danger for the community as a whole. The extreme and *'uncanny'* expressions of violence have recently attracted the attention of scholars for a variety of different reasons. On the one hand, these peculiar forms of violence reveal the complex psychological nature of child and adolescent participation in war. On the other hand, they determine the specific kind of trauma and fear experienced by communities and individuals during wartime. In turn, these traumas are highly connected to the erosion of social ties and the collapse of reciprocal confidence between individuals and communities, a dynamic that is being carried forward by the negative message of *'other'* as a menace.

When approaching the above-mentioned problems, the first challenge the scholar meets is the problem of making sense of terror

and atrocities. The violence perpetrated against civilians cannot, in fact, be simply understood in terms of political and military strategy. In eastern Congo, as in other contexts, it becomes urgent to answer the following questions: what is the social and symbolic meaning of these forms of violence? What is their short- and long-term impact on the population?

These strategies of terror have assumed different expressions in contemporary African conflicts. For instance, in Ituri and Kivu, militias and rebel armies attacked hospitals killing ill people and health workers, committing – according to survivors narratives – particular atrocities, such as cannibalism, rape and torture.<sup>13</sup> As it was argued in other contexts,<sup>14</sup> these attacks completely undermine the common sense of safety, making even hospitals possible targets. Moreover, once again in Ituri, some combatants were fighting dressed as women, wearing wigs and *pagnes* (female dresses). This attitude can be interpreted from different points of view. It panders to specific kinds of terror strategies: (1) constructing *contrasting images* of actors of violence (“women” as perpetrators and not victims); (2) confusing the enemy with uncanny behaviours; (3) acting on the fighters themselves (dressed in this unusual carnival-like guise, they feel they possess a new power), in other words, they are out of ordinary logic, out of customary social/gender roles, and subsequently they can perform and operate in an extraordinary way; and (4) reducing the degree of individual responsibility itself through the ritualisation of violence. The research of Ellis on the civil war in Liberia provides some arguments that can be valid also in our case; *some Liberians, when asked why male fighters during the civil war dressed in female clothing and adorned themselves with various objects, reply simply that this was done to frighten people. Others say that these are techniques*

*traditionally used in war*’ (Ellis, 1999). Paul Richards (1996) has tried to interpret the macabre violence perpetrated against women by young militiamen in Sierra Leone. Standing in opposition to the paradigm of ‘*new barbarism*’ proposed by Robert Kaplan, Richards argues that even if apparently useless, violence detains a specific rationality which has a general finality (instilling terror) and specific objectives (for example impeding breastfeeding by cutting breasts, or impeding harvest by cutting off the right hand of the members of a village where young people had defected).<sup>15</sup>

These forms of warfare and violence, apparently inexplicable in their atrocity, are common in eastern Congo too. In the stories of the victims and survivors there often emerges an intolerable sensation of incomprehensibility and unaccountability, which makes the psychological impact of violence even more dramatic, leading to specific problems in therapeutic and rehabilitation strategies. The case of female victims of rape is emblematic in showing the physical and psychological consequences deriving from the violence systematically perpetrated against defenceless civilians. For example, in a group of women victims of rape based in Goma and assisted by Synergie, a network of local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) active in east Congo, one woman waiting for a surgical intervention, isolated herself because she was ashamed other people would notice the bad smell of her body caused by urinal and faecal incontinence due to fistulas caused by repeated rapes.<sup>16</sup>

People without any active role in fighting, often women, become the common, or even the main, target of this routinely perpetrated violence. In these cases both the therapy and rehabilitation strategies have to meet physical and psychological needs. At the same time, health workers have to help

victims to find answers to their lacerating questions; why this violence against me? Why this humiliation? How can I survive? The violence exerted against an individual has always a collective impact and its dimension is well synthesized by the common expression *'social wounds'*. Acts like raping an 80-year-old woman,<sup>17</sup> or amputating children and their mothers, or killing them, while sleeping (as it was the case of the massacre in the Gatumba refugee camp in Burundi, on 14 August 2004), generate a deep sense of impotence and destroy any residual trust in social ties, erasing the hope to escape from horror. Atrocities, fear, and violence throw people into a space of death and terror beyond the line of the *'thinkable'* (Taussig, 1984). We are conscious that evoking these atrocities could legitimise those who think about Africa in terms of a continent that lives in a limbo, out of history and *'wrapped in the dark mantle of night'* (Hegel, quoted by Bayart, 2000). Nonetheless, such a limited perspective proves historically wrong as well as epistemologically naïve, especially if we take into account the strong political nature of current African wars, as well as their connection with the world capitalist economy.<sup>18</sup> The following part will concentrate more on the consequences of these observations on our scientific thinking.

### **Rethinking war trauma and rehabilitation in conflict areas**

The extreme and macabre forms of violence described above call into question the possibility of adopting the medical–psychiatric perspective on trauma, and the use of the concept of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) category. ‘Whereas the current DSM-IV definition of PTSD may be adequate in describing the psychiatric consequences of single-trauma exposure, it fails to capture the full range of disruption caused

by multiple and repeated exposure as is so often associated with human rights violations’ (Silove, quoted in Fox, 2003). Moreover, its medical, naturalised definition seems to many researchers entirely inappropriate in promoting effective strategies of intervention.<sup>19</sup>

Recently the medical–anthropological approach has shown the limits deriving from abusing the diagnostic category of PTSD, overall in non-western contexts (Antze & Lambek, 1996; Beneduce, 1999; Summerfield, 2001, 2002). Many experiences of rehabilitation and healing, founded on culturally and community-based strategies, have shown that it is possible to intervene effectively by resorting to local knowledge and experts, such as traditional healers (Reynolds, 1990, 1996; Varela & Querol, 2000; Igreja, 2003). The responses to trauma and conflicts are always determined by local culture and history. The forms of violence emerging from the state of war in contemporary Africa (such as rape and family violence, rapes committed on newborn children in order to prevent or heal HIV infection, torture, amputation, etc.) constitute in themselves a culturally determined response, even if perverted, to conflicts. Besides, the analysis of the local idiom of sufferance and the logic that underpins the local healing strategies can help us to understand the way culture and history shape peculiar forms of answers to conflicts and trauma. We also have to mention that enduring conflicts and other wider historical dynamics (evangelisation, colonisation, the proliferation of local Christian churches, market economy, and so on) in many cases undermine the consistency and the strength of traditional practices (of healing and rehabilitating, as well as of reconciling). On the basis of our research, we can say that these dynamics have eroded in some cases the moral authority and effectiveness of these

ritual practices, the latter always dependent on social consensus. So, no general statements are possible. Given these difficulties, the possibility and usefulness of recourse to 'traditional' practice, if this term retains some anthropological value, has to be carefully explored in specific contexts.<sup>20</sup>

Among the examples of community-based rehabilitation strategies within conflict and post-conflict areas in non-western countries, particular attention should be given to the cases of Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Cambodia for the significant role carried out by traditional healers. In Zimbabwe, traditional healers had a fundamental role in sustaining the liberation (Lan, 1985). In the after-war period they were engaged in healing the victims of violence, such as children affected by trauma, and they supported the social re-integration of child soldiers. According to Reynold's research, the specificity of the contribution of the traditional healers consisted of their use of local culturally pertinent categories, resorting to interpretations of the disorders that everyone could understand (for example, in reference to ancestors). Furthermore, they were able to intervene directly in the reconstruction of the social fabric within the communities:

*N'anga said that after the war there was more madness than before. Many spirits of people who had not been given correct ritual burials or whose deaths resulted from acts of wrongdoing remained unsettled. They said that war had retarded the thinking of children and had caused many to behave oddly (. . .) On returning from the war, men and women who had fought on either side visited healers to be cleansed. This was an important catharsis for both individuals and communities. Cleansing and protection were within the set of ritual actions in which children's distress was acknowledged and handled (Reynolds, 1990, 1996)?*

The case of Mozambique presents many similarities with Zimbabwe, above all in terms of the role of traditional healers in post war-time. Spirits of their dead loved ones haunted many Mozambican survivors of massacres because they did not receive appropriate, ritual burial. The *Cruz Vermelha Mozambicana* developed an original project with local *curanderos* of AMETRAMO (the association of traditional healers of Mozambique), which were able to intervene in the behavioural disorders manifested by some individuals (above all, children), even some years after the conflict had finished. In the area where massacres and atrocities had been committed, and many corpses had not been buried, the ones who accidentally crossed these 'contaminated' territories could be victims of the crisis of possession, states of confusion, and/or manifest other serious disorders. An approach that is sensitive to culture can reduce the risk of reproducing the 'category fallacy' described by Kleinman (1987, 1995): the fact that many categories and interpretations of western psychiatry are not adequate and/or effective within other cultural contexts. Furthermore, this kind of approach is the premise for healing the past: recovery, rather than 'forgetting' past violence, may depend on a culturally sensitive understanding of how societies remember (Connerton, 1989).

The originality of the therapeutic approach in the case of Mozambique was illustrated with its emphasis on ritual procedures, which aimed to purify the areas where massacres had been committed. More importance was given to communities than to individuals, and the territories where atrocities had been committed were rendered again usable to collectivities; they were 'returned' to communities, and to their memory. In other words, once the polluted territories were purified by means of rituals, collective memory was able to identify the villages' history and the

groups' past with those areas. Rituals restored the possibility of a territorialised identity for traumatised communities, and healed their *unsettled* memory (Querol & Ofice, unpublished). However, it is not always possible to use these kinds of strategies since in some cases, such as in the Kivu and Ituri, the conflict has destroyed or weakened social ties and the idea of 'community' itself. As Igreja remembers, '*local resources do not remain intact vis-à-vis their exposure to prolonged periods of violence or as a result of rapid socio-economic and political changes*' (Igreja, 2003). Yet, apart from these limits, as the same author suggests, '*the recognition of these intersecting and indivisible dimensions and their subsequent adoption leads inevitably to the formulation of questions related to the cultural variations in the aetiology, prevalence, expression, experience, diagnosis and treatment of traumatized population*'.

Another example comes from Cambodia, where the number of Buddhist monks has considerably increased after the conflict of the 1990s. NGOs and local communities considered them as a guide in the orientation of healing strategies and psychosocial rehabilitation. Many Cambodians requested, and paid for, religious ceremonies in order to commemorate their family members who had been killed during the conflict and not been buried. In this scenario, the practices of the Buddhist monks have assumed a clear rehabilitative and therapeutic value (Eisenbruch, 1998, 1999).

For many societies, the notion of 'trauma' itself, of an event (as dramatic as you like but singular), does not fit well with the collective experience of regular, chronic, ordinary conditions of violence, death, exploitation, uncertainty and poverty in which individuals and groups are forced to survive.<sup>21</sup> In an analogous perspective, Malkki stresses the difference between the humanitarian approach and a political orientation of violence,

arguing that the first risks universalising and dehistoricising refugees and their suffering. Combining local resources, such as traditional healers, with external relief workers can help to assess the psychosocial needs of large groups – not just individuals – and can inform health programmes to assuage suffering and to build the social conditions for peace (Malkki, 2002).

The question of memory and trauma is a moral rather than a medical or psychiatric issue. It is a critical question, because the major obstacles to reconciliation and healing projects are created around the strategies of remembering, and the politics of memory.<sup>22</sup> The right to *speak* about history, to *bear witness* to the events of which one has been a protagonist or victim, differs from simple '*remembering*' and '*elaborating traumas*' that have been suffered. In particular, the reconciliation process is faced with the often unresolved issue of truth and justice, as well as a lack of consensus about a shared version of facts and responsibility concerning massacres and violence. So, almost paradoxically, if history and remembering represent a necessity, or a moral need (especially for victims and their families), they can also exacerbate existing conflicts and affect social relationships, above all when the state, as is the case in the DRC, is unable to punish *all* the perpetrators (direct and indirect) of rapes, killings, and mass crimes. In this scenario, *politics of memory* (e.g., the political use of commemorations, celebrations, etc.) can select in a disputable way what is to be remembered or witnessed, and what has yet to be concealed. In all these cases, reconciliation can be affected by contradictions that will reveal themselves only later: a sort of '*sleeping effect*'<sup>23</sup>.

## Conclusion

The current drive towards peace and democracy in Africa has once again received a

moral backlash due to the continuing conflict dynamics in many African war zones. These areas include the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a country ravaged by a decade of warfare and humanitarian crisis. It is the opinion of the authors that the failure of the international community to implement peace in the DRC is largely due to a misreading (or no reading at all) of local conflict dynamics, which are sustained not only by the interests generated by prolonged warfare, but also, and foremost, by the social transformations that have occurred as a result of the accommodation of grassroots populations to a situation of state implosion. The conflict in the DRC has led to the emergence of new power complexes, which have taken on this double challenge of state implosion and prolonged warfare to foster new strategies of social, economic and political integration that are essentially illiberal (informal and transboundary) and socially exclusive (or ethnic) in character.

Young combatants play a crucial role in these new power centres. The Congolese conflict and the proliferation of rebel movements have not only realised a shift in authority to the advantage of these young recruits; armed groups have also provided young people with a renewed identity, as defined by their position as militia member. As a consequence, large parts of the younger generation(s) become alienated from their original social environment and have become role models for those children and youngsters that are not (yet) mobilised in armed groups. Even if social and economic marginalisation are the root causes for the enrolment into militias, the bitter end result is that these armed participants have helped to reinforce the view that violence is a legitimate strategy of defence, as well as a strategy of identity making, and improving one's social and economic position.

## References

- Antze, P. & Lambek, M. (Eds.) (1996). *Tense past. Cultural essays in trauma and memory*. London: Routledge & Kegan.
- Bayart, J.-F. (2000). Africa in the world: a history of extraversion. *African Affairs*, 99, 217-267.
- Bazenguissa-Ganga, R. (1999). Les Ninja, les Cobra et les Zoulou crèvent l'écran à Brazzaville: le rôle des médias et la construction des identités de violence politique. *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 33, 2-3, 329-361.
- Beneduce, R. (1999). Bambini fra guerra e pace: il caso di Eritrea ed Etiopia. Uno studio su bambini che hanno bisogno di particolari misure di protezione – Rapporto di missione (1-52). Firenze: UNICEF – ICDC.
- Callaghy, T., Kassimir, R. & Latham, R. (2001). *Intervention and transnationalism in Africa. Global-local networks of power*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Connerton, P. (1989). *How societies remember*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Duffield, M. (2002). *Global governance and the new wars. The merging of development and security*. London: Zed Books.
- Ellis, S. (1999). *The mask of anarchy* (260). New York: New York University Press. 260.
- Eisenbruch, M. (1998). From post-traumatic stress disorder to cultural bereavement. In: van der Geest, & A. Rienks (Eds.), *The art of medical anthropology. Readings* (251-260). Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis.
- Eisenbruch, M. (1999). Culture and illness – clinical presentation and management of

- somatoform disorders in Cambodia. In: Y. Ono, A. Janca, M. Asai, & N. Sartorius (Eds.), *Somatoform disorders: a worldwide perspective* (153-162). Tokyo: Springer-Verlag.
- Fox, S. H. (2003). The Mandinka nosological system in the context of post-trauma syndromes. *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 40 (3), 488-506.
- Igreja, V. (2003). 'Why are there so many drums playing until dawn?' Exploring the role of Gamba spirits and healers in the post-war recovery period in Gorongosa, Central Mozambique. *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 40 (4), 459-487.
- Keen, D. (1998). The economic functions of violence in civil wars. *Adelphi Paper*, 320, 13.
- Kleinman, A. (1987). Anthropology and psychiatry: the role of culture in cross-cultural research on illness. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 151, 447-454.
- Kleinman, A. (1995). *Writing at the margin: discourse between anthropology and medicine*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Lan, D. (1985). *Guns and rain: guerrillas and spirit mediums in Zimbabwe*. London: James Currey.
- Mbembe, A. (2002). African modes of self-writing. *Public Culture*, 14 (1), 267.
- Querol, E. & Office, N. (unpublished). *Práticas tradicionais de assistência às crianças afectadas pela guerra na província de Manica, Cruz Vermelha – Chimoio*.
- Reynolds, P. (1990). Children of tribulation: the need to heal and the means to heal war trauma. *Africa*, 60 (1), 1-38.
- Reynolds, P. (1996). *Traditional healers and childhood in Zimbabwe* (19, 58-59). Athens: Ohio University Press.
- Richards, P. (1996). *Fighting for the rain forest*. Oxford: James Currey.
- Scheper-Hughes, N. & Bourgois, P. (2004). *Violence in war and peace. An anthology* (1). Malden: Blackwell Publishing.
- Summerfield, D., (1996). *The impact of war and atrocity on civilian populations: basic principles for NGO interventions and a critique of psychosocial trauma projects*. London: RRN-ODI.
- Summerfield, D. (2001). The invention of post-traumatic stress disorder and the social usefulness of a psychiatric category. *BMJ*, 9, 61-64.
- Summerfield, D. (2002). Effects of war: moral knowledge, revenge, reconciliation, and medicalized concepts of 'recovery'. *BMJ*, 325, 1105-1107.
- Taussig, M. (1984). History as sorcery. *Representations*, 7, (summer), 87-109.
- Varela, F. & Querol, E. (2000). Trauma, tratamento e integração social das crianças afectadas pela guerra no contexto africano, Conferência *Reconstruindo Esperança*, Maputo, 28-31, October, 2000.

---

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on extensive fieldwork in eastern DRC, which was carried out in 2003 and 2004. It includes interviews with privileged interlocutors, such as civil society representatives, militia members, traditional authorities and victims of violence. Roberto Beneduce and Luca Jourdan wish to acknowledge the Ford Foundation for the grant that allowed the research in DRC within the international research on *Peace after Mass Crime* co-ordinated by CERI and Sciences-PO, Paris.

<sup>2</sup> International Rescue Committee, *Mortality in the Democratic Republic of Congo: Results from a Nationwide Survey*, conducted in September–November 2002, and reported in April 2003 – although the IRC data have been questioned by some observers. For a detailed follow-up, see the numerous weekly reports by OCHA, the United Nation’s humanitarian assistance programme.

<sup>3</sup> A good example are events in Beni-Butembo (North Kivu), where a new nexus of power emerged that united the need of both the local RCD-ML rebel movement and certain entrepreneurs to block interference in local business. Raeymaekers, T., *Su contadini e uomini d'affari: l'economia reale del "Grande Nord"*, in: *Afriche e Orientali*, anno VI, n.1/2/2004.

<sup>4</sup> Here, the case of Ituri is illuminating, because it explains how local militias have exploited their links with foreign patrons to install mechanisms of extortion and repression. See amongst others: Perrot, S., *Entrepreneurs de l'insécurité: la face cachée de l'armée ougandaise*, in: *Politique africaine*, 75, Oct 1999, 60-71; Vlassenroot, K. and T. Raeymaekers, *The Politics of Rebellion and Intervention in Ituri: The Emergence of a New Political Complex*, in: *African Affairs*, 103, pp. 385-412

<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the best example is the control mechanism in North Kivu led by Provincial Governor Eugène Serufuli. Here, a complex consisting of an NGO ('Tout pour la Paix et le Développement'), Local Defence Forces and administrative control has enabled certain Banyarwanda elites to consolidate their political and economic interests within a single political framework. This complex offers an illustrative example of how local elites have combined foreign and national support networks to protect their local interests. Although initially backed by Rwanda, Serufuli has used his local power base during the transition process to pressure himself into a dominant political position at a national

level. While this project has certainly added to the internal strife in this region, the immediate reward has been a consolidation of Banyarwanda power in Rutshuru and Masisi, including an extension of cattle and grazing land.

<sup>6</sup> According to one analysis, 'the continuing existence of *parallel structures* in the capital, Kinshasa, creates a great deal of confusion and also regularly leads to open conflict in the [eastern] provinces. Most, if not all, tense situations (...) are attributable to political infighting in the Transitional Government'. Such parallel structures have included the continuous bypassing of the new military hierarchy through informal agreements: Romkema, H., *Update on the Transition. The Case of the Kivu Provinces*, ISS Situation Report, Pretoria, 7 May 2004, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> On the controversial relationship between youth and war cfr. Richards, P., *Fighting for the Rain Forest: War, Youth and Resources in Sierra Leone*, Oxford: James Currey, 1996; Peters, K. and P. Richards, *Jeunes combattants parlant de la guerre et de la paix en Sierra Leone*, in *Cahiers d'Études africaines*, 1998, XXXVIII-2-4, 150–152, pp. 581-617; Van Acker, F. and K. Vlassenroot, *Youth and conflict in Kivu: 'Komona clair'*, in: *The Journal of Humanitarian Assistance*, 2000, <http://www.jha.ac/great-lakes/b004.htm>; Jourdan, L., *Being at War, Being Young: Violence and Youth in North Kivu*, in: Vlassenroot, K. and T. Raeymaekers, *Conflict and Social Transformation in Eastern DR Congo*, Conflict Research Group, Gent: Academia Press, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> On youth as *emerging issue* in Sub-Saharan Africa see also Argenti, N., *Air Youth: Performance, Violence and The State in Cameroon*, in: *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 4, 1998, pp. 753-781, and Argenti, N., *Kesum-Body and the places of the Gods: The politics of children's masking and second-world realities in Oku (Cameroon)*, in: *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 7, 2001, pp. 67-94. See also Thompson, C.B., *Beyond*

Civil Society: Child Soldiers as Citizens in Mozambique, in: *Review of African Political Economy*, 26, 80, 1999, pp. 190-206.

<sup>9</sup> Mbembe, A., *On the Postcolony*, Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2001, p. 80. On generalised despotism, cultural vs. political identity and making of genocide, see Mamdani, M., *When Victims Become Killers. Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda*, Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 2001.

<sup>10</sup> Cfr. K. Peters, P. Richards, 'Why We Fight': Voices of Youth Combatants in Sierra Leone, in: *Africa*, 68 (2), 1998, pp. 183-210; Filip De Boeck, Le 'deuxième monde' et les 'enfants-sorciers' en République Démocratique du Congo, in: *Politique Africaine*, 80, 2000, pp. 32-57. Mbembe writes recently about the necessity of asking about the reasons for which 'in Africa, the struggle for human sovereignty and the satisfaction of biological needs almost always seem to go together with orgiastic participation in different forms of human destruction'. (On the Power of the False, in: *Public Culture*, 14, 3, 2002, op. cit., p. 636).

<sup>11</sup> We can partially compare these phenomena with the ideology of shape-shifting in secret societies during colonial times in Sierra Leone as described by Jackson, M., The Man Who Could Turn Into an Elephant: Shape-shifting among the Kurako of Sierra Leone, in: Jackson, M. & I. Karp (eds.), *Personhood and Agency. The Experience of Self and Other in African Cultures*, Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1990, pp. 59-78.

<sup>12</sup> It is the case, for example, of the movie *Rambo I*, which was very popular among the young rebels of the RUF in Sierra Leone and became very popular as well in the DRC. Cfr. Richards, P., *Fighting for the Rain Forest*, op. cit., p. 57 and following pages.

<sup>13</sup> In Ituri, militias attacked the hospital in Nyakunde killing ill people (see Human Rights

Watch, *Ituri: 'couvert de sang'*; Vol. 15, No. 11 (a), Luglio 2003, p. 34). Similar acts were reported by a survivor met at the Frantz Fanon Center, (Turin) referring to the hospital in Kanya-Bayonga, which was the target of rebel army's assaults in late summer 2004.

<sup>14</sup> For example in Nicaragua: see Summerfield, D., *The Impact of War and Atrocity on Civilian Populations: Basic Principles for NGO Interventions and a Critique of Psychosocial Trauma Projects*, London: RRN-ODI, 1996.

<sup>15</sup> Richards, P., *Fighting for the Rain Forest*, op. cit.

<sup>16</sup> For some considerations on this issue in Kivu, see the number 11 of «Regard croisés», Revue trimestrielle of Pole Institute: *Une plaie encore ouverte: La problématique des violences sexuelles au Nord Kivu*, Goma, April 2004. See, for analogous data, the research by Giller, J., Caring for 'Victims of Torture' in Uganda: Some Personal Reflections, in: Bracken, P.J. & C. Patty (eds.), *Rethinking the Trauma of War*, London-New York: Free Association Book (Save the Children), pp. 129-145.

<sup>17</sup> We met and interviewed this woman during our field research (August 2004) in the above-mentioned Goma centre.

<sup>18</sup> This relationship has been analysed by some authors above in two different perspectives: 1) according to some authors, the globalization increases uncertainty of local, ethnic, cultural identities (the war and its macabre expressions become strategies aimed to counteract – by means of 'necrographic maps' – this uncertainty and the erosion of local power (see Arjun Appadurai, *Dead Certainty: Ethnic violence in the era of globalization*, *Public Culture*, 10, 2, 1998, pp. 225-247; L.H. Malkki, *Purity and Exile: violence, memory, and national cosmology among Hutu refugees in Tanzania*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995); and, 2) the perspective emphasised by other researchers

stresses above all the economic dimension these conflicts, in other words the relationship between globalized economy and local reproduction of war and conflict (see amongst others: Jean and John Comaroff, "Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction: Notes from the South African Postcolony", *American Ethnologist*, 26, 2, 1999, pp. 279-303); K. Vlassenroot and T. Raeymaekers, *Conflict and Social Transformation in Eastern DR Congo*, Gent: Academia Press Scientific Publishers, 2004).

<sup>19</sup> On PTSD, see *Transcultural Psychiatry* special number, 37, 3, 2000; Young, A., *The Harmony of Illusions. Inventing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995). A critique about the pseudoscientific language of EMDR is recently made by Stein, D., Rousseau, C. & L. Lacroix, Between Innovation and Tradition: The Paradoxical Relationship Between Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing and Altered States of Consciousness, in: *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 41, 1, 2004, pp. 5-30.

<sup>20</sup> On these issues, and more generally on the contribution that the ethnography of trauma and PTSD can give, see the special number of *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* (28, 2004).

<sup>21</sup> For different applications of PTSD, see: Antze, P. & M. Lambek, *Tense Past. Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*, New York & London: Routledge, 1996.

<sup>22</sup> Autesserre, S., *The Politics of the Peace Process in Eastern Congo*, mimeo, 2004. For a similar argument, see: Ottaway, M., Rebuilding State Institu-

tions in Collapsed States, in: *Development and Change*, 33 (5), pp. 1000-1023.

<sup>23</sup> As Last suggests, 'Reconciliation is, ultimately, about restoring sociality, about re-establishing the trust necessary not just to tolerate but to cooperate in partnerships that can survive even the threat of failure' (M. Last, *Reconciliation and Memory in Postwar Nigeria*, in Veena Das, Arthur Kleinman, Mamphela Ramphele, Pamela Reynolds (eds.), *Violence and Subjectivity*, Berkeley: California University Press, 2000, pp. 315-332). See, on this issue, also Borneman more pragmatic view: 'Reconciliation I define not in terms of permanent peace or harmony but as a project of departure from violence.' (J. Borneman, "Reconciliation after Ethnic Cleansing: Listening, Retribution, Affiliation", *Public Culture*, 14, 2, 2002, pp. 281-304).

*Roberto Beneduce, professor of Cultural and Psychological Anthropology, Psychiatrist, works at the Department of Anthropological Sciences at the University of Turin.*

*Luca Jourdan is professor of Political Anthropology and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Bologna, Italy.*

*Timothy Raemaekers is attached to Conflict Research Group at the University of Gent, Belgium.*

*Koen Vlassenroot is Professor of Political Science and co-ordinator of the Conflict Research Group at the University of Gent, Belgium. Address of correspondence: Koen Vlassenroot, Conflict Research Group, Universiteitstraat 8, 9000 Gent, Belgium. E-mail: Koen.Vlassenroot@UGent.be*